

Have you ever imagined being stranded on an island populated with monster mutations? Well that's the petrifying premise of *Danger Island*, the pilot show for a monster-of-the-week TV series that is set to take the UK by storm. Our man in America, Steve Biodrowski, stowed away on a boat to the location to take these pictures and file this exclusive sneak preview of the horrors in store...

# Isle



"At one point I called it *Northern Exposure* meets *Alien*," jokes producer Robert Sertner (*Invitation To Hell*), indicating his intent to make *Danger Island* more than just another monster-of-the-week show. The pilot for this exciting new American television series is based on the premise that, in 1976 a scientific laboratory was established on a remote island to study the effects of germ warfare and genetic engineering. Twenty years later, survivors of a plane crash wash ashore and discover that experiments by the abandoned lab have transformed the tropical paradise into a threatening hell of unimaginable dangers...

The ensemble cast includes TV veterans Gary Graham (*Alien Nation*), Richard Beymer (*Twin Peaks*), June Lockhart (*Lost In Space*) and model-turned-actress Kathy Ireland (soon to be seen in the science-fiction spoof *Mom And Dad Save The World*). The two-

hour pilot show was written by Bill Bleich (*The Hearse*) and directed by Tommy Lee Wallace, who was responsible for the recent mini-series adaptation of Stephen King's *It*. In the UK we'll soon be seeing *Danger Island* as a direct-to-video release.

The project got off the ground when producer Sertner was asked by the network to come up with a new idea. Recalls the producer, "I said I didn't know how to do cops and robbers and all those things that seemed to work for popular shows. But if we could come up with something that was different enough, then I'd be pleased to take a shot at it."

Several meetings led to the idea for *Danger Island*, which was then given to Bleich (who had previously written *The Stepford Children* for NBC) to develop into a screenplay. Says the writer, "As of November last year it was a one-line concept: a strange island in the South Pacific where weird things happen. There was some elaboration, but I boiled it down to that one-liner and we developed it from that."

Although the network had originally envisaged an *Alien*-wannabe, the project took on some political overtones when Bleich came up with the idea of a CIA research station. "I was aware of the CIA biological warfare interface from the kind of reading I do," says Bleich. "I brought that to the story, ran with the ball and thought, 'What if one of those stations was abandoned under mysterious circumstances? There's a certain resemblance to *The Outer Limits*, of course, and as with that series the big question was how to go into greater depth than just presenting a new bug-eyed monster each week. That's the way we envisage the show. We don't want people to tune in just to see a one-dimensional monster; we're going for three-dimensional monsters."

Offered the director's chair





# of **Fright!**

because of his proven success with horror on television, Wallace was immediately taken with the script. "Any time you get something going like *Robinson Crusoe* or *Swiss Family Robinson*, I'm interested," he explains. "On a more serious level, it's an opportunity to comment rather slyly on

Unfortunately, the more you learn about the CIA, especially what they were up to in the 60s, the more plausible this story becomes. In fact we have to kind of back off from what really happened just to make it believable. The CIA, from everything I can tell, is a dangerous group of people operating in an

a mini-series. He notes, "You have to remember what the word 'pilot' means. It's supposed to ignite the flame of episodic madness and, to mix metaphors, kick off a successful series. In all of your considerations, from casting to sets, you have to keep in mind that the important thing is to



the state of the world we have created - not only through environmental carelessness, but through diabolical government programmes. Our government has a lot to answer for, especially in the Third World.

incredibly irresponsible manner. If nothing else, I'd like to shed some light on what our taxes are paying for in that area."

Wallace found working on a pilot show slightly different from working on

create a setting to which you can return each week and tell a new story."

Doing a pilot also presents challenges for the writer. As Bleich points out, "There are two things you have to keep your eye on: one is that





you want a viable series, with sustainable characters and a multiplicity of plot lines; the other is you want a two hour movie that works. But a movie is a closed dramatic structure, usually entailing some form of character development, and that's the last thing you want in a pilot. So you serve two masters, and you usually end up moving back and forth between them."

In this case, serving two masters was complicated by time constraints, which prevented Bleich from writing a set of guidelines for the show. "We didn't have a 'bible' to start out with,"

he says. "We just sort of barrelled along. I wrote the script between the last week of November and the middle of January. Originally you have a lot more lead time."

With this kind of hectic schedule it wasn't surprising that the script needed revisions, which continued up through the location shooting in Hawaii. Says Bleich, "The thing was being re-written even while we were shooting. We were into the second week before the last two acts were written completely, so we only had a general idea where everything was going to end up. It was quite exciting, really..."

One revision that was a big surprise for one of the actors changed his character from a conventional hero into a mutant. "Originally, my character was sort of a leader who stands up and takes command," laughs *Alien Nation* star Gary Graham. "Then, when I got the second rewrite, a note on the script said: 'One of the changes is that your character doesn't start getting monsterish until later on.' I looked at that, read it again, and said to myself, 'What? I turn into one of the monsters? Oh no!' You see, I

had just done a series where I worked with someone playing an alien who spent a lot of time in make-up, and I always used to make fun of him having to sit for long periods in the make-up chair. Some days on this project I was



in that chair for six and a half hours, so I guess that he finally exacted his revenge!"

The mutation of Graham's character is the result of being stung by the tentacle of some unseen sea creature - presumably the result of one of the CIA experiments. The gradual transformation required five different stages of make-up, including black contact lenses for a doe-eyed sympathetic look. "My character is an unwitting passenger on the Mutation Express," explains Graham, who likens the role he plays to John Merrick in *The Elephant Man* or Seth Brundle in *The Fly*. The prosthetics he was forced to wear prevented him from enjoying the location as much as the rest of the cast and crew, as going for a swim between takes was obviously out of the question.

By the end of the pilot, Graham's character has discovered an antidote, but not necessarily a cure for his condition, returning his appearance to normal but leaving open the possibility of future relapses. Says producer Sertner, "Gary's big fear is that we're going to write the character on a regular basis with all that make-up, because we left it open as to whether all the toxin is out of his system. So if

he doesn't behave himself he's going to have to play in make-up every day."

Besides Graham's prosthetics and the tentacle, the effects company Fantasy II also provided make-up for a brief hallucination scene in which one of the island's

severely affected by the toxin, who mutates into something akin to *The Creature From The Black Lagoon*.

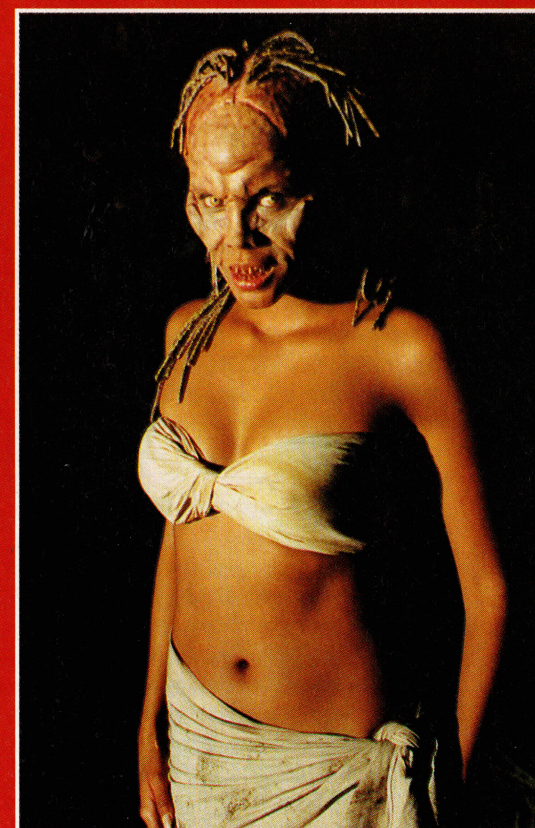
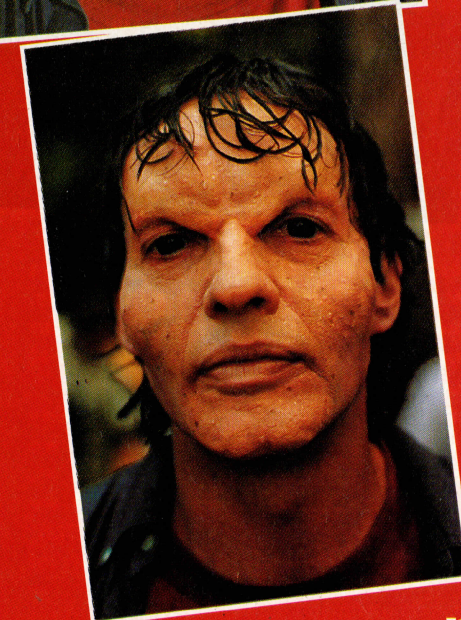
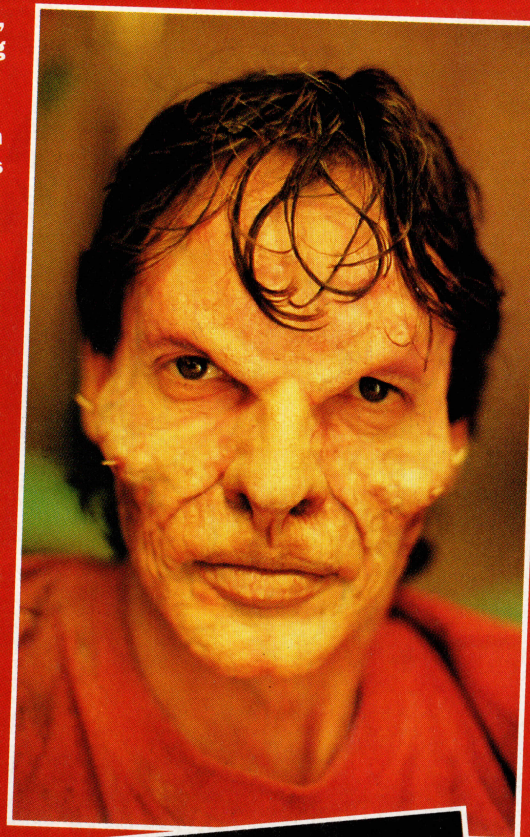
"Originally it was much more of a crustacean," recalls Fantasy II's Bart Mixon. "In the middle of our first week, Tommy decided that wasn't really what he was going for; he wanted something more reptilian, more humanoid - with eyes. He was trying to sell the sympathy angle, that it's not a marauding monster, but someone they used to like and want to help."

Mixon supervised a make-up crew of seven, and they had a relatively short time - four to five weeks - to prepare their effects to go before the camera. "We have five weeks to build, with our last week overlapping the first week of shooting, and then four weeks on set," says Mixon.

native population turns into a monster. But their biggest job was the full-body suit for another character more

"As it turned out, all of our effects pieces, except the final creature costume, were due the first week, which meant my travelling on location with one assistant while a reduced crew stayed at the shop to finish the monster."

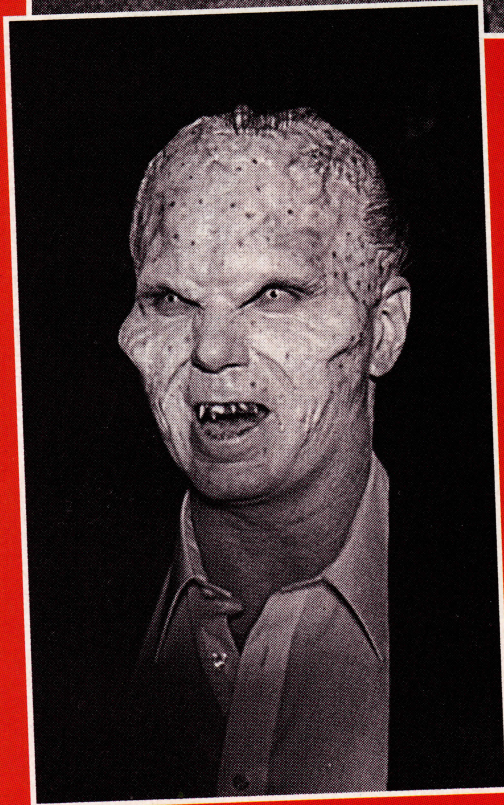
Since the premise is that all of the island's plant and animal life has been infected, the intention is to have a new threat every week, rather than bring back the monster from the pilot. However, the nature of a weekly series presents some obvious limitations on the effects. "At some point the reality of the budget will hit us," acknowledges the producer. "My guess is we'll have to make every second or third episode the blockbuster and then find a way to fill in the gaps. Obviously we're up against the fact that the audience will be expecting a







something that will be chopped out by the network censors. I'm sure there are many writers out there banging their heads against the wall writing stuff that will never get on television. With all these restrictions it's not surprising that horror and science-fiction have met with mixed success on television. How can *Danger Island* succeed where so many others have failed? "It is not a genre that has been incredibly successful on mainstream T V , "



the story is interesting you will forgive a lot. Our success will not rise and fall on the quality of the effects, but on the quality of the writing, much like *Star Trek*."

With stories emphasising character survival and sympathetic monsters, not to mention the obvious restrictions on television violence, how horrific can this show be?

"Good question," says Sertner. "There are limits. We'll learn them as we go along, but I'd like to press the envelope as much as I can, and of course there may be stronger versions for overseas." Bleich adds his own comments: "You always come up against that question of how much horror can you do on television. I don't like to start with the attitude that it is impossible, so I won't try. You have to look at your definition of horror and say, 'Okay, so we're not going to do the gross-out, but that didn't stop *The Uninvited* or *Psycho* from being

fabulous.' It doesn't mean you can't do something with meat on its bones - you're just not able to show the meat or the bones!

"I can write, 'A tentacle causes all sorts of havoc.' Then you get a set of network notes that say, 'Be sure not to put in too much grotesque violence.' Then it gets down to Tommy having to shoot it, and that's a production question. These guys are not going to waste time filming

acknowledges Bleich. "But one would hope that by using strong characters and storylines we can find more of an appeal within this horror concept of people trapped on a mysterious island. It's a balancing act, and we have to get it right first time..."

Adds director Tommy Lee Wallace, "I think the emphasis will ultimately be on character survival. We want very much to keep it from being a monster TV show. Somehow *Star Trek* and *The Twilight Zone* managed to both be successful because they were idea shows, concept shows where anything could happen. I hope that we can do the same, because of the altered reality of the island. The 'anything around the corner' idea shouldn't just pertain to creepy crawly things. It's really about a family of people and their struggle for survival - a microcosm of the human race, if you want to be pretentious about it."

After location shooting in Hawaii, the production finished effects inserts on the stages of Fantasy II, where post-production opticals were added. The show is about to be aired in the States as these words are being written, and it won't be long until the production team know whether they have the go-ahead for a series. In the meantime it seems likely we'll be seeing the pilot movie on video here (probably on the CIC label) early in the new year. Don't miss it, it could be a monster...

certain level that we can't deliver on a TV budget. But if we pick and choose, and craft the story to work within our budget, then I think we have a shot at success.

"The original script had many sequences that we cut because we couldn't do justice to them, and we homed in on the ones we thought we could do. We also took a look at *Star Trek* and decided that, if the heart of